

THE INFLUENCES AND USE OF JAPANESE TRADITION

1

2

3

Published in *American Craft*, Aug/Sept 1988, 18 & 66.

In the early 1950s potters in the United States, lacking what they felt was a vital indigenous ceramic tradition, turned almost en masse to the ceramic art of Japan for inspiration and aesthetic sustenance. The Englishman Bernard Leach, in his seminal work, *A Potter's Book* (1940), was the first to introduce the intricacies of Japanese ceramic art to Americans. This book and Leach's subsequent tours of the United States – one in 1952 with Shoji Hamada (who was to become the most recognized Japanese potter in the West) and Soetsu Yanagi (founder of the Japanese folkcraft movement) – marked the genesis of American potters' love affair with Japan.

Americans seemed particularly susceptible to two aspects of the philosophy that Leach, Hamada and Yanagi shared and espoused: Tariki-do and Chokkan. The first is a Buddhist concept. As applied by Yanagi to craft, it means that beauty is the result of the surrender of self to a higher order like one's craft rather than the self-conscious effort of an individual craftsman. This was conveniently interpreted by some to support a kind of dropout life-style with subsistence craft making the focus. Chokkan, Yanagi's theory of direct perception, states that an individual's intuitive, non-intellectual confrontation with an object is the basis for determining beauty. It became a justification for abstract expressionist ceramic art.

As a consequence of these cursory adaptations of Yanagi's philosophy – only one of the many schools of aesthetic thought in Japan – Japanese ceramic art has been romanticized, popularized and commercialized to the point that it has been stripped of any real meaning it once held. Copies of Japanese shapes with *kaki*, *shino* and celadon glazes over imitative brushwork can be found at every craft fair across the United States. This kind of Japanese-inspired ceramics has become so trivialized, in fact, that now any visual or verbal reference to it at all is enough to make collectors, critics and dealers roll their eyes and walk away. This trivialization, however, is not so much a comment on the significance of Japanese ceramic art as it is a reflection of the superficial and cavalier manner in which American ceramists have approached the history of their medium and exploited its forms.

While large numbers of potters have been content merely to borrow from books and publications the shapes, glazes and decorative techniques that they find pleasing, a smaller number have traveled to the Far East in an effort to understand what exactly it is that makes them respond so strongly to work from an alien culture. Apprenticeship in Japan has become for hundreds of Americans a preferable alternative to the *laissez-faire* approach to pottery education found in academic institutions in the United States. Unfortunately, there is a tendency among most of these potters to use their narrow, romantic view of Japanese ceramics to determine the worth of all ceramic art. Their propensity to judge ceramic art entirely by the standards acquired from various teachers in Japan has resulted in a genre that, on the surface at least, appears to stress overt references to traditional forms and techniques as a goal in itself. This limited focus has not only kept these potters from making intellectual inquiries into the nature of the beauty they originally found so compelling in Japanese ceramic art, but also kept them from questioning the relevance of such work in Western culture.

>>

THE INFLUENCES AND USE OF JAPANESE TRADITION

1 2 3 4

The result, a glut of lackluster ware, has fueled the criticism by many in the field – mainly ceramists in academia – that Japanese ceramics has little to offer modern potters and that it is too culturally specific to be relevant in the West. Those who hold this view, by the way, seem to find nothing incongruous about Seiji Ozawa conducting the Boston Symphony in the performance of 18th- and 19th-century European music. Nor do they question the ability of this music to move an audience in Tokyo today. Cultural specificity, it seems, is a door that swings only one way.

These critics also see the emphasis on tradition and the repeated references to works from the past as an abrogation by Japanese-influenced potters of individual aesthetic responsibility. They demand pottery that “is of our time,” that reflects society’s trends and preoccupations no matter how banal. Now this obsession with being modern is as shortsighted as the belief of some potters that ceramic art should be judged entirely by the prescribed standards of 17th century Japanese tea masters. Ceramic artists from both extremes will always dogmatically insist that their particular “ism” or tradition has a corner on significance and relevance. Either course, if followed, would leave generations of ceramic artists with a visual language incapable of expressing much more than fashionable twaddle or nostalgic tripe.

The challenge, then, for American potters is not to exorcise all visual clues of the Japanese influence; nor is it to Americanize Japanese forms. It is instead the challenge of expanding that visual language through the search for and exploration of their own subject. What ultimately matters is not that an artist is influenced by the past or a particular culture, but what he or she does with that influence.

There is another equally important challenge these American potters face in contemporary Western culture. It is one of convincing skeptical curators, critics and other power brokers that pottery is capable of the same kind of serious expression usually expected of painting and sculpture. David Hamilton, head of ceramics at the Royal College of Art, London, in a 1978 review of works by Henry Hammond and David Leach in the British magazine *Crafts*, wrote:

“In this century ceramics in general and pottery in particular have not been a vehicle for expressing intellectual originality or fundamental truth. Unless or until it becomes a major cultural force, and by this I mean expressing some exalted intellect or exposing an unrevealed facet of the human condition, words like genius and greatness are inappropriate.”

Hamilton’s culturally biased view of pottery and the aspirations of potters is a common prejudice having just enough relative truth to make it seem believable. What Hamilton does not understand is that there is a modern, industrialized culture – one of the top economic powers in the world, in fact – that has historically expected and continues to expect “intellectual originality and fundamental truth” from pottery. That country, of course, is Japan. In Japanese culture there is a presumption that pottery can express the human condition as sublimely and articulately as any art form, and this presumption is one of the principal reasons so many Americans are drawn to Japanese ceramics in the first place. Another reason is that this art form employs a complex visual language with numerous examples of eloquent statements that range from the seemingly unpretentious and rustic Bizen and Shigaraki ware to the ostenta-

THE INFLUENCES AND USE OF JAPANESE TRADITION

1 2 3 4

tious and complicated decoration of Kutani and Imari ware. In Japan a potter has not only this rich language, with its seemingly inexhaustible vocabulary of shapes, glazes and decorative treatments, but also a visually literate audience that holds in high esteem those who use the language with style and authority.

The difficulties and pitfalls of working within such a complex visual language, however, are immense. Philip Rawson, the British art historian, in his book *Ceramics* (1971), the most important treatise on ceramic art in this century, noted that when artists lose sight of the meaning of cultural images they borrow, "loss of authenticity, corruption, and pretense" are the result. He goes on to say:

"It has become possible to treat what was originally a live existential discourse with condensed meaning, as pure convention at the level of mere chatter. This has happened especially, of course, when one culture has adopted the forms and symbolisms of an alien culture...Potters may then begin to follow mere convention or fashion. Such a failure shows itself in their work, which may slide in the direction of mere dead "ornament"; this has certainly happened at various times."

If modern potters influenced by Japanese ceramic art are to avoid the pitfall of making mere dead ornaments, they have to recognize that the significance of historical work from Japan does not lie in its use as a formal prototype. The real value exists in its ability to reveal the aesthetic potential and importance not only of pottery but of the human activity associated with its function. It is for this reason that these ancient works bear closer scrutiny from potters hoping to create work that will resonate with the same kind of urgency many of the ancient pieces still possess. As the late Kazuo Yagi, one of the most important ceramic artists in modern Japan, pointed out in an essay on Kenzan, "those elegant designs that are Kenzan at his best are still being repeated in today's ceramics world. But I feel that they have no significance as the formal 'patterns' they have become. Instead it is worth experimenting with them as a means of returning to the process through which they were developed, or even to the invention itself." Yagi urged contemporary potters to go beyond the superficial and obvious to an understanding of the very nature of the work itself. Rawson has asked us to do the same: "If possible we must try and discover, through active use of our imagination, how live meanings of works of ceramic art which played some role in the life of every patron can be revived in our minds." It is through the active use of our imagination that we can begin to perceive, for example, the nature of Kenzan's beauty. And with that perception we can start to echo that beauty, not by imitating his designs, but by addressing the same basic philosophical and aesthetic concerns that moved Kenzan and that have made his work as powerful and relevant in our culture today as it was in 18th-century Japan.

The potential for meaningful expression that exists in pottery in general and Japanese pottery in particular will never be realized by potters or recognized by critics, dealers and collectors until we reject cultural prejudices as well as romantic oversimplifications. Only then can we begin to look at the history of ceramic art as the accumulated desire of men and women to express their lives through their most intimate objects. Neither the denial of history nor the sterile appropriation of its forms offers the potter a

rob barnard essays

THE INFLUENCES AND USE OF JAPANESE TRADITION

1 2 3 4

viable strategy for confronting the problems of aesthetic expression at the end of the 20th century. Both ignore the commonality that human beings have shared throughout history and instead focus on the externals of culture. By doing so, they trivialize those aspects by divorcing them from their source – mankind's struggle to find meaning and purpose in life.